

EXTRACT FROM ENGLISH HERITAGE'S RECORD OF SCHEDULED MONUMENTS

MONUMENT: Winchcombe Abbey

PARISH: WINCHCOMBE

DISTRICT: TEWKESBURY

COUNTY: GLOUCESTERSHIRE

NATIONAL MONUMENT NO: 28873

NATIONAL GRID REFERENCE(S): SP02332834

DESCRIPTION OF THE MONUMENT

Winchcombe is situated in a wide combe on the north west edge of the Cotswolds, and the abbey and its precinct lie towards the southern central side of the town. Winchcombe was an important centre in the Saxon period; by the early eighth century it had become one of the chief royal centres of the sub-kingdom of the Hwicce, who owed their allegiance to the kings of Mercia. Offa is said to have built a nunnery at Winchcombe in the late eighth century, although there is no indication that this is linked to the abbey. The construction of the abbey was begun by Cenwulf in 798 and dedicated in 811 to St Mary. During the next 150 years monasticism declined in England, and at Winchcombe monks gave way to secular clerks; but in about 969 the clerks were made to withdraw, and the monastery was refounded as a Benedictine community. In 1151 the church and monastic buildings were seriously damaged by fire, and books and charters were destroyed. The abbey was endowed with extensive estates, and various abbots brought either prudence or reckless expenditure with their tenures, but generally the abbey's importance as a landholder continued until the Dissolution. In 1539 it was surrendered, and the buildings were given to Lord Seymour of Sudeley who carried out the demolition. In 1815 the Abbot's house, which had been used as a parish warehouse, was pulled down. The abbey precinct is bounded by Back Lane on the north side, High Street, Gloucester Street and Abbey Terrace on the south side, and Malt Lane and Cowl Lane on the west and east sides respectively. Evidence for the extent of the precinct comes from documentary, topographical and archaeological sources. Although many of the abbey's records have been destroyed, surviving records show that in 1289 the abbot sought to have closed a 'way' which ran through the monastic precinct. This was known as Petticruelane which, according to the abbot, gave unwelcome access to monastic grounds. The result of this was the establishment of Back Lane, further to the north, and outside the precinct, as the outer perimeter of the medieval town. There is an earth bank, about 2m high and spread to 25m to 30m wide, which stretches for about 260m along the Back Lane boundary. This bank, which contained 4th century pottery, has been variously interpreted as a defence belonging to the Saxon burgh and a monastic precinct boundary. Since Back Lane was established in the 13th century, it would seem that, whatever its origin, the bank must have served as the perimeter wall of the abbey. To the south, the precinct is defined by a stone wall fronting Abbey Terrace and forms the boundary with the town. This wall is approximately 2.5m to 3m high, and turns the corner into Cowl Lane where there are two arched doorways in it. The lower courses of the wall are

of large dressed stone blocks, which differ in form from the irregular stone of the higher courses.

The line of this wall follows the southern and eastern precinct boundary for much of its length. In addition, on the south, west and east sides the abbey boundary is hemmed in by plots of land which are characteristic of a medieval town layout, showing that these were boundaries from at least the medieval period.

The site of the abbey was excavated in 1815 and 1892-3, the latter excavation directed by Loftus-Brock. These excavations revealed the presence of the abbey church and claustral buildings to the south of the two houses which remain in the abbey grounds. These houses are 'Winchcombe Abbey', claimed to have been the malt-house of the abbey, and 'The Abbey Old House'. In the latter, Loftus-Brock recognised 15th century roof structures, and more recently medieval roof trusses have been noted, and it is likely that the building originated as one of the ancillary buildings of the abbey. During the excavation the foundations of the nave of an abbey church were first uncovered as well as the bases of the piers of the central tower. The post-Dissolution stone robbing and site levelling made identification of structural features more difficult, but the excavator uncovered a section of walling within the Norman monastic layout which was interpreted as part of a pre-Conquest church. A pier base in the nave supported the belief that the nave was built around a system of cylindrical piers as at Tewkesbury and Gloucester. Three coffins were found, two within the Norman nave, and the other south of the chancel wall. In addition a quantity of tiles were present. From the results of this excavation it was argued that the conventual buildings lay to the north side of the church rather than the more usual south side. The site of the great tower of the church is now marked by a stone cross and stone tablets with inscriptions in boundary walls at either end of the site to provide a guide to the alignment of the church.

Excavations by Davison in 1962 prior to the construction of 'Willow Cottage' and 'Little Keep' fronting Cowl Lane, revealed a property boundary of late 11th century or early 12th century date, a number of rubbish pits and heavy wall footings of the same date. In 1985 excavations took place prior to the building of Winchcombe Church of England Infants School. The work was directed by C J Guy who found within the area of the abbey precinct, an aisled barn of late 13th century or early 14th century date, and other surfaces and structures also thought to be associated with the abbey. In the early 1990s a small excavation by J Hoyle for Gloucester County Council situated in what is now the car park to the south of the new public library, uncovered ground disturbance which was suggested to have been the remains of monastic fishponds.

St Peter's Church, in the south west corner of the abbey precinct, was built between 1470 and 1480. It is thought that prior to the building of the church the townspeople worshipped in the nave of the abbey church. Archaeological observation during renewal of floors in the church showed that although 18th and 19th century vaults take up much of the space under the church, there are areas of pre-18th century deposits. In the churchyard, the excavation for a new garden of remembrance outside the east end of the church, where previously there was an eastern annex of the church, revealed burial soil with many human bone fragments, the result of the upcast of many centuries of grave digging. Buried grave stones dating to the 17th century and cutting across earlier graves were also uncovered. On the south east side of the church, within the churchyard, is a churchyard cross which is essentially of medieval date, but was restored in 1897. The cross, which is Listed Grade II, is situated about 10m south east of the church. It has a square socket stone, partly restored shaft and restored head. The base of the socket stone, which has a deep drip moulding on its upper face, is 0.8m square and 0.45m high. Above this is the drip moulding which is 0.8m wide at the bottom, 0.55m wide at the top and 0.35m high. The whole socket stone is 0.8m high. The shaft, square at the bottom, sits in a socket which is 0.25m square. Above this it tapers, in

octagonal section, to the restored head. The shaft is formed of two parts, the first 0.25m is original, and the rest restored. The total height of the shaft is about 2m. At the top of the shaft is a decorated thickened terminal, above which is the restored lantern head divided into four niches containing figures sculpted in relief. On the north side is a figure of Christ, on the east side a shield, and the remaining two figures are too worn to decipher. The socket stone bears the inscription on its west side 'Restored in the 60th year of Queen Victoria's reign June 20th 1897'.

A number of finds, including medieval and Romano-British material, have been made in Abbey Field to the north of the abbey church.

St Peter's Church is a Listed Building Grade I, and the dwelling known as 'Abbey Old House' is a Grade II* Listed Building. 'Winchcombe Abbey' is a Listed Building Grade II as is the boundary wall fronting onto Abbey Terrace. A number of items are excluded from the scheduling; these are the library, the public toilets, Winchcombe Church of England Infants School, Winchcombe Junior County School and its outbuildings, St Peter's Church, the dwellings known as 'Ashbe', 'St Mary's', 'Little Keep', 'Willow Cottage', 'Abbey Court', 'Abbey Dore' and its outbuildings, 'Winchcombe Abbey', 'The Abbey Old House', the East Gloucestershire Health Service Trust building, all fences, road surfaces and pavements, walls and telegraph poles. The ground beneath all these features is, however, included.

ASSESSMENT OF IMPORTANCE

From the time of St Augustine's mission to re-establish Christianity in AD 597 monasticism formed an important facet of both religious and secular life in the British Isles. Settlements of religious communities including monasteries were built to house communities of monks, canons (priests), and sometimes lay-brothers, living a common life of religious observance under some form of systematic discipline. The main components of the earliest monasteries might include two or three small timber or stone churches, a cemetery and a number of associated domestic buildings, contained within an enclosure or vallum. Those sites which have been excavated indicate no standard layout of buildings was in use. Rather a great diversity of building form, construction, arrangement and function is evident. The earliest sites were not markedly dissimilar from contemporary secular settlements, although their ecclesiastical role may be indicated by the presence of objects indicating wealth and technological achievement, such as stone sculpture, coloured glass, inscriptions, high quality metalwork and pottery. Only the church and leading secular figures are thought to have had access to the skills and trade networks which produced such goods. Later foundations in the 10th and 11th centuries generally had one major stone church and a cemetery. By this time other domestic buildings were more regularly aligned, often ranged around a cloister. Documentary sources indicate the existence of 65 early monasteries. The original number of sites is likely to have been slightly higher and would have included sites for which no documentary reference survives. Of these, less than 15 can at present be linked to a specific site. As a rare monument type and one which made a major contribution to the development of Anglo-Saxon England, all pre-Conquest monasteries for men exhibiting survival of archaeological remains are worthy of protection.

Winchcombe Abbey lay in one of the chief royal centres of the Saxon period, which from 1007 to 1017 was the centre of a shire, a large block of land consisting of many subdivisions called hundreds. The monastery is therefore expected to preserve rare evidence for late Saxon religious building. Despite demolition following the Dissolution, the site of the monastic precinct has had only limited disturbance, and therefore good survival of below ground archaeological levels can be expected. There is much potential for further investigation of the relationship between the monastery and the features inside and outside the monastic precinct. Indeed, a number of features

associated with the monastery have been identified within the precinct including fishponds and an aisled barn. The archaeological remains within the precinct will provide information on the functioning and day-to-day life of the monastic community over more than 700 years of its existence. In addition, because of its proximity to the town and the townspeople's use of the abbey church and St Peter's Church within the precinct, the site will provide insights into the relationship between the monastic and secular communities. Apart from its monastic use, the site was occupied by secular clerks in the early 10th century, and parts of the site again saw secular use after the Dissolution. The presence of Romano-British pottery gives another dimension to the potential of the abbey site in terms of Roman settlement of the area. There is documentary evidence for the foundation of the monastery in the eighth century, and to named people of the Saxon period associated with the monument.

The churchyard cross survives in what is believed to be its original location and is still functioning as a public monument and continues to serve as a public amenity. Despite the restoration of the head and shaft, the cross survives well as a visually impressive monument essentially of the medieval period.

SCHEDULING HISTORY

This scheduling amalgamates two previously scheduled monuments:

1. Monument included in the Schedule on 18th October 1962 as:

COUNTY/NUMBER: Gloucestershire 411

NAME: St Mary's Abbey (site of)

2. Monument included in the Schedule on 10th July 1996 as:

COUNTY/NUMBER: Gloucestershire 28503

NAME: Churchyard cross in St Peter's churchyard

The reference of this monument is now:

NATIONAL MONUMENT NUMBER: 28873

NAME: Winchcombe Abbey

SCHEDULING REVISED ON 02nd June 2000